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THE CONDOR FIFTY YEARS AGO

By C. S. SHARP

IT was recently my good fortune to secure a work that is probably little known to most of the present day ornithologists. This is the "North American Oology," by Dr. Thos. M. Brewer, one volume only, published by the Smithsonian Institution in 1857. It is somewhat of the nature of Bendire's "Life Histories," the size and general make-up being the same, but necessarily much abbreviated. It comprises 112 pages of text with preface and addenda, table of contents, "Catalogue of the Species of Birds inhabiting North America north of Mexico" (as contained in the volume), index, and five pages of lithographic plates, illustrating the eggs of fifty-one species, seventy-four eggs in all being shown.

These plates are very fine, being only slightly inferior to the splendid illustrations in the "Life Histories."

In the preface Dr. Brewer says: "The present part embraces the descriptions and illustrations of the eggs of the Order Raptore and of the Tribe Fissirostres of the Order Insessores. So far as he (the author) is at present aware, these include seventy-nine species inhabiting North America. Of these the eggs of no less than twenty are still entirely unknown to him, while of those of eleven others he has no present means of giving illustrations." In this connection it will be of interest to note that our present list contains fifty-eight recognized species of Raptore and some thirty-nine subspecies. Dr. Brewer in his catalogue gives fifty-nine, several of which have been since discarded or given sub-specific rank. Of the Insessores, families Caprimulgidae, Hirundinidae and Halcyonidae he gives twenty species. Our list contains the same number of species and thirteen subspecies for these three families.

As may be readily understood the facilities for obtaining accurate data fifty years ago were extremely limited, and access to large series of eggs and nests was not possible as at the present time. Eggs of many species that we now consider fairly common were then unknown. In many instances Dr. Brewer's descriptions are from single eggs only, or from hearsay, or from drawings of eggs. One can readily understand the tremendous discouragements of scientific work under such circumstances, and it is not surprising that only the one volume was produced. As an instance of contradictory data and lack of it his article on the Condor is of interest, and is particularly so in view of Mr. Finley's most interesting papers. It is given without abridgment.

*Cathartes Californianus.**(Eleven lines of synonymy)*

Vulg.—The Californian Vulture.

The California Turkey-Buzzard.

But one instance of the possession of a well-authenticated egg of this species by a naturalist has come to my knowledge. This was one laid in confinement by a female belonging to the Garden of Plants in Paris. An accurate drawing of this was taken by Dr. James Trudeau, and is now in my possession. There seems no reason to doubt that the egg thus laid does not essentially vary from those deposited in a wild state. It certainly is hardly possible that the variations between this and the natural egg can be so total and striking, as between it and the attributed shape and markings of the eggs of this species, if we credit the previous accounts which have been given of the eggs of the Californian Vulture. These descriptions are, however, all traceable to one source, so far as I am aware. David Douglas, in the *Zoological Journal*, speaks of the eggs of

this Vulture as nearly spherical, JET-BLACK, and about the size of those of a goose.¹ Following this authority, all writers who have referred to the eggs of the California Vulture have described them in a similar manner. That they should be spherical would be an exceptional case to the whole genus, and is therefore hardly probable, though by no means impossible. Markings of a jet-black color, even to the extent of blotches, spots, or lines, are of very rare occurrence, if not positively unknown. Nor am I aware that any of this family of Vultures ever construct nests. For these reasons, and until the statements of Mr. Douglas can be confirmed by other testimony, I am inclined to discredit his accounts of its nest, eggs, and habits in every respect. In this unbelief I am in part confirmed by the testimony of Mr. Townsend. He was informed, as he tells us, by the Indians of the Columbia River, that the Californian Vulture, like all others of its genus, breeds on the ground, fixing the place for a nest in swamps, under the pine forests, chiefly in the alpine country,—in this conforming with the habits of the family.

The egg in the Garden of Plants corresponds, in its generic characteristics, with the eggs of the *Cathartes aura*, the *C. atratus*, and also with those of the *jota* and *brasiliensis* of South America. It is also remarkably similar, except in size, to occasional marked varieties of the egg of the Condor (*Sarcoramphus gryphus*) which, however, is usually white and unspotted. I feel justified, therefore, in accepting the drawing as an authentic representative of those of this species.

This egg measured $3\frac{1}{8}$ inches in length by $2\frac{3}{8}$ in its greatest breadth. Its ground color is that of all the known eggs of this genus, a rich cream-color, or a yellowish-white. A ring of reddish-brown confluent blotches surround the larger end, leaving the residue nearly free from markings. A few blotches of a smaller size and lighter color are distributed over the whole surface. The faint purplish-drab markings noticeable in the eggs of the preceding species (*C. atratus*) are not observable in this specimen.

The Californian Vulture is confined to the western slope of the Rocky Mountains. It is there found from the extreme southern portions of the Pacific coast of North America to Washington Territory and the British possessions, where it abounds in the summer season. It was met with by Mr. Townsend on the banks of the Columbia, upwards of five hundred miles above the mouth of that river, throughout the months of June, July, and August.

ADDENDA

Cathartes Californianus.—In Newman's "Zoologist" (Vol. XIII, p. 4633, 1855) occurs the following in reference to the nesting and eggs of the California Vulture. It is contributed by Mr. A. S. Taylor, of Monterey. I have given it with the view of putting on record all the statements and descriptions made public in this connection, though I do not think the account here given will be confirmed in all respects by more full and certain testimony. Mr. Taylor's information is, as may be seen, derived from the reports of others, and is therefore not so reliable as it would be if given from his own observations.

"The egg of the bird is three inches broad and five long, about one-third longer than a goose's egg. Its color is a dirty pale blue, spotted brown, and it is nearly as thick as an ostrich's egg. The same person informs me, that the female lays only one egg during the season, and makes her nest on the ground in the ravines of the mountains, and generally near the roots of the redwood and pine trees. It is three months before the young birds can fly."

Escondido, California.

FROM FIELD AND STUDY

Pointers for the Field Naturalist.—*Bamboo*.—To those who, like myself, make up skins with "sticks in 'em" I can recommend bamboo as the best possible wood for bird necks. It is also useful for extending broken legs in large birds. One end of a small piece is easily whittled down to fit tightly into the stump of the broken member; for mammal tails—*ne plus*

¹ "They build in the most secret and impenetrable parts of the pine forests, invariably selecting the loftiest trees that overhang the precipices on the deepest and least accessible parts of the mountain valleys. The nest is large, composed of strong thorny twigs and grass, in every way similar to the nests of the eagle tribe, but more slovenly constructed. The same pair resort for several years to the same nest, bestowing little trouble or attention in repairing it.

They lay two nearly jet-black eggs, about the size of those of a goose. They hatch generally about the 1st of June, and the period of incubation is twenty-nine or thirty days."—(David Douglas, *Zoological Journal*.)